

Government of the District of Columbia



Child and Family Services Agency

Testimony of
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Hearing
***“Assessing Foster Care and Family Services
in the District of Columbia:
Challenges and Solutions”***

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the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia
Daniel K. Akaka, Chairman | George V. Voinovich, Ranking Member

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Good afternoon Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Voinovich and members of the subcommittee. My name is Dr. Roque Gerald and I currently serve as the Director of the District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency. I appreciate this opportunity to present testimony for your hearing -- “Assessing Foster Care and Family Services in the District of Columbia: Challenges and Solutions”. I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today about the highlights of our continued child welfare reform and more specifically our concerted effort to increase and expedite adoptions for children in need of permanent, loving homes.

CFSA’s mission is to ensure the safety, permanence, and well being of abused and neglected children and to strengthen troubled families in the District of Columbia. We operate a 24-hour child abuse and neglect reporting Hotline (202-671-SAFE) and investigate reports of child abuse and neglect. Our services include foster care, adoption, and supportive community-based services.

In 2001, when CFSA was established as a cabinet-level agency, I joined as a charter member of the executive team and established a unique in-house Clinical Practice function that administers physical, mental, and behavioral health programs for children, youth, and families. At that time, we set out to build a highly functioning child welfare system that was responsive to the needs of District’s at-risk families. We implemented new and innovative programs consistent with best practices in child welfare from around the world and built basic infrastructure. Key accomplishments of those early years include hiring an adequate staff of licensed social workers, investing in a broad array of resources that directly support quality service to children and families, establishing a Federally certified case management system, and establishing data

analysis and quality assurance functions. By 2007, the Federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) of District found a strong system and improved outcomes for children.

In January of 2008, the discovery of the tragic deaths of the Jacks and Fogle girls shocked and saddened our entire community. In response, Mayor Fenty mobilized his administration to provide tangible assistance to CFSA and to address the systemic issues that led to the tragedy. Mirroring a nationwide trend following high-profile child tragedies, calls to our Hotline skyrocketed. When I stepped in as interim director in July 2008, CFSA was faced with a daunting backlog of child protective services (CPS) investigations. The agency worked diligently throughout the end of FY 2008 and we achieved our goal of reducing the backlog to fewer than 100 before the close of the first quarter of FY 2009 (we currently average a backlog of approximately 20-40 investigations). Now, we are posting solid achievements in every area of our core mission and forging ahead in improving outcomes for the children, youth, and families we serve.

New Strategies for Permanence Succeed

As I mentioned earlier, achieving permanence for children in youth in foster care is a fundamental part of our mission. We want every child and youth, regardless of age, to exit the system for a permanent home and are truly acting on our deeply-held value that everyone needs and deserves a family. By our new definition, all pathways—reunification with birth parents, guardianship, or adoption—are equally open to exploration as long as the outcome is a safe, nurturing, permanent home. At the very least, every older youth will exit with a life-long connection to one or more stable, caring adults outside the system. This represents a sea change

in thinking and a second all-out mobilization of CFSA and the system—this time, in service to permanence. We are using innovative, new strategies that are succeeding on two fronts: adoption and increasing permanence for older youth.

Goal of Adoption: In the early 2000's CFSA made significant progress in expediting a backlog of stalled adoptions however, by 2008 adoptions were declining. While some of this decline was commensurate with the decline in the District's foster care population, it was also clear that barriers to timely permanency needed to be broken and processes needed to be improved.

In 2009, CFSA and our private-provider partners reversed the decline in adoptions, exceeding the target of 125 with 128 adoptions in the calendar year—a 25 percent increase over the 102 adoptions in 2008. Finding adoptive homes for young people in foster care can be challenging because many are older or want to stay together with their brothers and sisters. Among young people adopted from the system in 2009 were 16 teens and 20 sibling groups—the highest numbers of children in these categories achieving adoption in several years. Our work also resulted in a record number of finalizations at the annual Adoption Day in Court during National Adoption Month last November. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Senator Mary Landrieu for her ongoing support on Adoption Day. It means a great deal to both our staff and the families that are participating that she takes time out of her busy schedule to attend each year.

My first order of business in leading CFSA was reducing the backlog, restabilizing the agency, and fulfilling a series of obligations under a stipulation agreement. With mounting pressure from oversight authorities and advocates to privatize adoptions, CFSA drew on input from nation

experts to create a different and unique approach that proved to be instrumental in increasing adoptions in 2009. For children and youth with the goal of adoption, CFSA initiated the proven best practice of high-impact teams, which are established to focus on and expedite adoption for children with that goal. CFSA initiated this strategy in January 2009, and six months later, I described it in detail to the *Washington Post* for their article that appeared in July. One set of teams is composed of CFSA adoption specialists; another team is a public-private partnership between CFSA and local non-profit agency Adoptions Together. Our name for this strategy is the Permanency Opportunity Project—or POP. Features of this flagship approach include:

- Teaming at all levels—across systems, for the first time, through the public-private partnership as well as between social workers around individual cases. Family Court of the DC Superior Court is fully on board with us in the push for permanence and moving adoptions to finalization swiftly.
- Consideration of multiple pathways to permanence beginning from the moment a child or youth enters care.
- Diligence in using new strategies to identify adoptive families for children and youth and to move those in pre-adoptive homes to finalization promptly.

In 2009, POP reviewed and worked on a total of 260 cases of children and youth with the goal of adoption. They also provided consultation and coaching around adoption to case-carrying social workers both within CFSA and at private providers who manage about half the local caseload.

Older Youth: The second front in our push for permanence is older youth in care. Reflecting the trend of other urban child welfare agencies, CFSA is presiding over a groundswell of youth growing up in care—fully 60 percent of the District foster care population today. Also mirroring a national trend, we’re seeing an increase in young people entering care in their teens.

In 2007, the Casey Strategic Consulting Group provided us with a wake-up call by showing that CFSA and the Family Court had institutionalized aging out without permanence as the default goal for older youth. This local practice far exceeded that of several other comparable cities. In the fall of 2008, I signed an Administrative Issuance that put an end to automatic assignment of Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement—or “APPLA”—as a goal for older youth. In a little over a year, our census of youth with the goal of APPLA dropped from a high of 850 to 678.

In the first half of 2009, CFSA reviewed the cases of 722 youth who had the goal of aging out to explore their opportunities for legal permanence or life-long connections. Delving in from this new perspective revealed that 80 percent of these youth already had an established or potential life-long connection with at least one stable, caring adult. Social workers are now using this information to rekindle or create legal permanence or lasting connections for older youth. Adoption and legal guardianship are pathways for some. For others, birth family circumstances have changed so that reunification with parents is possible. A new approach is the “commitment contract” where a caring adult and youth agree to maintain a supportive, life-long relationship. This is reserved only for those cases where legal permanence isn’t possible.

While we are making important strides, CFSA faces several challenges in maximizing our push for permanence for more children and youth in care and in other areas of our core mission.

Among our needs are:

- Raising public awareness about opportunities to adopt from the public system or to provide foster care. Regular media campaigns would provide the broad-based, sustained outreach necessary to increase recruitment.
- Doing more to build life-long relationships for older youth in care for whom legal permanence is not possible. The plight of youth transitioning out of care with little personal support is now well recognized. The growing trend toward use of “commitment contracts” between these youth and caring, committed adults could be a worthy demonstration project with national implications.
- Providing better preparation of children, youth, and adults for the transition to adoptive family life. Availability of expert pre-permanency counseling is a proven strategy for managing expectations, building the commitment necessary to sustain permanence, and ultimately reducing the incidence of disruption.
- Implementing a differential response approach to reports of child neglect. District children and families could gain the benefits other jurisdictions have realized in increased child safety, improved parental engagement, and reductions in recurrence of maltreatment.

Enhancing Well Being

Whenever possible, child welfare should leave those we serve in a safer, more stable, and improved condition. In 2009, CFSA stepped up efforts around our core mission of caring for the well being of children and youth we serve. I will briefly describe two improvements among many, which are very much in line with the intent of portions of the Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act.

First, every child and youth needs to have a health screening before entering placement and comprehensive medical and dental exams within 30 days. For years, CFSA contracted out for these services, which didn't wholly fulfill our needs. In December 2009, we brought routine pre-placement health screening of children and youth in-house at our headquarters. Among advantages of this approach are collection of medical histories from families, development of sound medical files for children and youth in care, improved health information for foster caregivers, and greater convenience for social workers.

Second, in 2009, CFSA introduced an enhanced Educational Assessment that social workers complete semi-annually for each school-age child and youth whether at home or in foster care. It guides social workers in going deeper to support regular school attendance and academic achievement and helps them identify and work with the educational decision maker for each child and youth in care. For older youth in care, we're working to increase the high school graduation rate and streamlining access to opportunities for college or vocational training.

I would also like to provide a brief update on two of CFSA's ongoing efforts to support the well being of the children in our care. When I was Director of Clinical Practice, I was able to use

support from Congress to help initiate innovative programs for children and families. In 2002, an appropriation contributed to launching the practice of Family Team Meetings locally and also to building capacity in mental health services for children and youth in care. Today, the District's unique approach to Family Team Meetings is embedded in practice, routinely receives high marks from families, and has gained national and international recognition.

Core service agencies that today serve the mental and behavioral health needs of children and youth in District care exclusively are a direct outgrowth of evidence-based mental health services that Congress supported years ago. Because I had direct experience with these projects, I wanted to share that your investments yielded significant, long-term dividends. Thank you again for that support.

2010: Building Excellence

The Agency is definitely stronger today than ever before. Even so, District child welfare remains under Federal Court oversight, and I want to provide the brief update you requested on the status of the lawsuit. In February 2009, the District of Columbia filed a motion asking the Federal District Court to expedite a process to terminate court oversight by the end of the calendar year. That request is still pending. It is fully consistent with the Supreme Court's admonition in *Horne v. Flores* [129 S. Ct. 2579, 2595 (2009)] to "return control to state and local officials as soon as a violation of federal law has been remedied." The District has corrected violations of law the court originally found in 1991, and has implemented important structural changes including, among others, elevation of CFSA to a cabinet-level agency and creation by Congress of a local Family Court, which oversees CFSA performance in each case where abuse or neglect has been

adjudicated. Today, CFSA bears no resemblance to what was described in testimony before the court in 1991. The position of the city is the District's ambitious goals for local child welfare remain in place, and it's time for responsibility for District child welfare obligations to return to complete local control.

In 2010, three major goals are at the top of CFSA's agenda:

- **Continue effective strategies** for excellence in safety, permanence, and well being. Monitor for effectiveness and adjust as necessary to support good outcomes.
- **Institutionalize best practices in case management** that support better and faster outcomes for children, youth, and families. A full complement of social workers with reasonable caseloads creates an opportunity to move practice to the next level of excellence. We're requiring an expanded range of services, higher quality, and more consistent demonstration of outcomes from private providers as well.
- **Continue listening to older youth and deliver** for them. A major goal is completing the redesign of programs for older youth in care that we launched in 2009. We sought ample input from these young people and are now working to deliver more of what they need in ways they find relevant and appealing. This involves concurrently preparing youth for adulthood with the same standards and care we provide for our own sons and daughters while aggressively continuing to seek permanent homes or life-long connections for them.

In conclusion, the District of Columbia assures you that we are moving forward and building on our recent successes to ensure that every child we serve has clear pathway to permanency. I appreciate the Committee's attention and will answer your questions.